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DONALDSON

ON ADULT EDUCATION  
AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT

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*J. P. Donnelly*

ON

*from the Author.*

# ADULT EDUCATION

AND

## SELF-IMPROVEMENT.

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### AN ADDRESS

TO THE

### YOUNG MEN'S INSTITUTE,

OF

### BURY ST. EDMUND'S,

ON

### THEIR SECOND ANNIVERSARY,

*The 18th May, 1852,*

BY

### JOHN WILLIAM DONALDSON, D. D.,

HEAD MASTER OF BURY SCHOOL.

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# ADULT EDUCATION

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No one, who is not blind to the signs of the times, can fail to perceive that the future destinies of this country must depend on the success with which we carry out the great undertaking of educating the whole community. But although this is generally admitted, I think it is often supposed that this problem is confined to the duty of providing school-training for the children of the lower orders. This supposition, whenever it is productive of any effect on the conduct of individuals, must be regarded as a mischievous error; for it induces a forgetfulness of the reasons which make it desirable that the mental and moral cultivation of all classes should be duly regarded, and that the school training of the lower orders, and working classes should be continued and completed. Now we must educate the upper classes, if we would not deprive rank of its only lustre, and wealth of its greatest charm; we must educate the middle classes, if we would furnish them with the inducements for shaking off the selfishness of indolent respectability, if we would enable them to resist the aggressions of intrusive bigotry, if we would break down the party-walls of class-prejudices, if we would inspire every one of those who have virtually a large share in the government of England, with an enlightened regard for his own and his country's welfare; and lastly, we must

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educate the lower orders, if we would make the the labouring man feel that he is a responsible and rational being, not a mere tool for doing work, or an echo for propagating opinions which he does not understand; we must educate the lower orders, if we would give them that reverence for law, that sense of truth and justice, that habit of self-respect and self-control, without which we cannot ensure the gradual amelioration of our institutions from the risk of revolutionary disturbances, and save this country from the alternative so sternly proposed to many nations on the Continent—the alternative of choosing between despotism or anarchy.

If the man of rank and fortune is not properly educated, we have either the rude sportsman who despises literature, or the voluptuary, who scoffs at morality, or the town dandy, who dawdles away the brief and precious hours of existence in the pursuit of contemptible frivolity. All these, and others more or less like them, are lost to their country and their age. They live and die without having effected anything, except so far as they have succeeded in making their order odious in the eyes of those beneath them. Fortunately the aristocracy of this country have always been distinguished, in the majority of instances, by their endowments of mind and character—no less than by the nobility or opulence to which they are born. In this country, as in Greece, the gentleman is an accomplished and good, as well as a rich or highly-connected man: and happily we may often add that he is the true knight, who bears the cross on his shield, on his sword hilt, and in his heart, who exhibits the spirit of Christianity in the unsullied brightness of his honour, in the unselfish devotedness of his personal courage, and in the unaffected benevo-

lence of his demeanour and conduct. It is for this reason that the English noble is loved, respected, and imitated by his inferiors; it is for this reason that he is permitted while still a stripling to lead the stern discipline of our embattled array, it is for this reason that his success, in equal competitions to which all are admitted, is always greeted with general approbation. It cannot be denied that a great deal has been done of late years to improve the education of the upper classes. Very rarely now-a-days do we meet with those examples of violence, effrontery, shameless profligacy, and brutal stupidity, which some of us remember, and of which we may all read. Public opinion, and its great engine, the press, have done something to abate the scandal; but a great deal more must be attributed to the improvement of that public education, by which the minds of the young of the upper classes are especially influenced. At first, only some few schools were distinguished by the tone of christian and gentlemanly feeling which they imparted to their pupils; and I remember, that when I was in residence at Cambridge, I could tell by a young man's manner and conduct from which of the public schools he had come up to College. But now an inattention to education properly so called, is the exception rather than the rule at those places, where the upper classes receive their boyish training, and the effect of this is felt throughout the length and breadth of the land.

Of the education of the great middle class at the present day it is somewhat difficult to speak. Divided as it is into a number of different subsections, it is perhaps impossible to say anything which does not require a great deal of special qualification. But if we define the middle class as consisting of those who are engaged in making



money by some kind of business, and who enjoy by virtue of their exertions all the comforts, and a varying proportion of the luxuries of life, the following picture may be maintained (of course with individual exceptions,) as generally true in its outline and colouring. The man of business as such is generally prone to acquiesce in the consciousness of his own respectability. If he is ambitious to be fashionable or aristocratic, he is found to imitate rather the expensiveness than the accomplishments of the class above him. But when most satisfied with his own position, he seems to care for little beyond his personal and domestic comforts, and the decencies of his outward appearance. Abundant meals, and good clothes, and a well furnished parlour, are the extent of his wishes. And he measures things without his own circle by the ideas which suffice for his own narrow world. Hence he is too often the tool of bigotry, the echo of stereotyped opinions, the victim of class prejudices, the blind or obstinate advocate of measures which have no connexion with his own or his country's better interests. If this is a true description, Englishmen of the middle class must be very difficult to educate. Indeed, I am inclined to regard them as practically the great stumbling-block in the way of a general diffusion of higher cultivation in this country; and while I would take all means to induce them to seek a better kind of education for their children, I place my hopes of an improvement in their intellectual condition, an improvement on which, as I have said, the prospects of this country very much depend, in the lateral pressure of the upper and lower classes, when the ameliorated education of the latter shall combine with the daily increasing condescension of the former, and both together break through the crust of comfort-



able indolence in which our tradesmen and professional men so often envelope themselves.

The intellectual improvement of the lower order, is the most practicable and most influential, though not ultimately the most important department in this great business of national education. It must result from the increased enlightenment and awakened discernment of the higher order among us, and will in the end, combined with this, and directed by it, re-act on the more inert mass of the middle classes. On the present occasion, it is my intention not so much to discuss, however briefly, the general question of education, as to indicate the best way of working the machine which you have recently set in motion, and to which you desire to give the most extensively useful application. I shall therefore say nothing about Schools, though of course you will presume that I am an advocate for the establishment of Schools in every nook and corner of this Island. There is scarcely any kind of school, to which I would not extend that amount of support and encouragement which it deserved and required. Ragged schools, and respectable schools, endowed schools, and self-supporting schools, Sunday schools, and week-day schools, infant schools, and schools for children of a larger growth are all in their different degrees worthy of consideration and assistance. But I must take this part of the subject for granted, and apply myself to the case before me. I am addressing a "A YOUNG MEN'S INSTITUTE;" I am requested to state my views as to the best way of managing and guiding a society consisting mainly of young persons engaged in some kind of labour, fostered indeed and patronized by the highest and most educated class in this town and neighbourhood, but really carried out on

the principle of mutual instruction and self-improvement. All of you, Members, have received some sort of elementary school instruction, and you are all supposed to be inspired by the laudable ambition of improving to the utmost the faculties and opportunities which God has given you. And the question is—how are we to make this Institute most completely available for the good object which you have in view?

In the first place, it is desirable that you should include in your Society as large a number as possible of the young mechanics or intelligent labourers of this Town. The Mechanics' Institute, has, as I think most unwisely, refused to receive you as an integral part of its own composition. I attribute this to the influence of middle class prejudices; and I see no alternative for you, but to work out by yourselves the problem which you wished to undertake with their frank and active co-operation. The arguments, by which they supported the rejection of your overtures for amalgamation, were those, which are generally satisfactory to the middle class of Englishmen; for they merely amounted to a declaration of their contentment with an existing state of things. If they have since then endeavoured to widen the basis of their society, they have done so under the pressure of those stimulants which your continued existence seems to supply, and which they call agitation. But even if what they propose were sufficient to meet all the exigencies of the case, they must be aware that it is now too late to check your independent action; and as it is desirable that there should be no division among the young men of Bury who are anxious for self-improvement, it is to be hoped that they will join you in sufficient numbers to secure your effectual working. So convinced am

I that there is not room for two such societies in Bury, that I must confine what I can do to the particular institute which seems to me most likely to be an effectual agent in the improvement of intellectual culture in this Town, especially if I observe in any other society tendencies which the well-wishers of diffused and generally accessible knowledge must regard as hostile or obstructive.

And this leads me to consider, in the second place, the claims which this Institute makes to the support and assistance of the higher classes in the Town and Neighbourhood. You count among your patrons and members all, or nearly all, of the most completely educated and accomplished persons in the district. And if they continue to support you, I think you may consider yourselves in a more favourable position in regard to the true sources of your intellectual wealth than any similar society in this Country.

When Institutions of this kind were first formed in Great Britain, it was proposed even by those who were most active in their establishment that no persons of the better class—none in fact, except Mechanics and Artizans, should be admitted to any participation in the management or direction, or even be counted among the members. This was soon felt to be a course calculated to keep up those class-prejudices, which education ought to extirpate, and it was well remarked in a Northern Paper that the exclusion of the richer and more educated would render it impossible to work the machinery with any effect. “As the most prominent feature of this establishment,” says a writer in the *Leeds Mercury* of 1823, “would be the regular Delivery of Lectures, we apprehend it would not be easy to find persons in this Town at

once qualified and disposed to lecture ; and they cannot be engaged from other places but at a heavy expense. In Edinburgh and Glasgow, where some of the Professors of the Universities have lectured gratuitously, and where scientific men are very abundant, this difficulty is not experienced." Now I think it will be admitted by any one who is acquainted with the present state of Bury St. Edmund's, that the number of persons here who are able to contribute by Lecturing or otherwise to the spread of knowledge in this locality, bears a large, an unusually large proportion to the population of the place, you have here not only the well-bred and accomplished gentleman, who is found in all parts of England, but you have also literary and scientific men of no ordinary learning and ability, who are but thinly scattered over this Island, and all these have shown a willingness to contribute in different ways to the social and intellectual culture of the Town. Whatever plans then you may be able to form for self-education and mutual improvement, you can count upon encouragement and support of the best kind. And if I may assume that your society will include, if not the majority, at least sufficient number of the intelligent and industrious young men of the place, if I may assume that the educated class will as heretofore encourage you with sympathy, and assist you by the gratuitous outpourings of their own matured and ready knowledge, (and I think I may assume both the one and the other), I can have no doubt as to the mode of action most likely to bring to good effect the intentions with which this society has been formed.

To begin with yourselves. The first prerequisite is to take care that you do not sell yourselves to any employment which will be incompatible

with a reasonable amount of leisure for self-improvement. The early closing system, or the limitation of the hours of toil, toward the establishment of which so much has been done of late years, is the essential condition without which the working man or mechanic will be unable to profit by the advantages held out by societies like yours. Our wish is to give every man an individual consciousness and independent existence; to let him live, as all responsible beings must live, as a free member of the social body to which he belongs; to allow him to exercise the untrammelled energies of his nature. Otherwise, as an able writer has said, "he will not be cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry;" he will become an inseparable adjunct to some complex machinery of labour, and, losing his distinctive humanity, he will become a tool instead of a man. Therefore do not sell all your hours for wages, but retain some part as a store for duty and a tribute to your immortal nature.

But supposing that you have secured to yourselves a reasonable amount of leisure, your next business is to see to its right employment. If you bestow your spare time on self-indulgence and dissipation, you are in a worse condition than if you had no spare time at all. Better far to be a useful tool than to be the bond slave of foolish or degrading inclinations. As far as relaxation is concerned, I think that those, whose work is of a sedentary and indoor description, ought always to bestow a certain time on exercise on the open air. Healthful exercise is essential to the development of an unclouded intellect. But when this claim is satisfied, there ought to be no choice between intellectual and other amusements. The words *tedious, dull, dry, unentertaining*, when applied

to such pursuits as elevate the mind, belong only to the vocabulary of a puerile, pampered, and frivolous being. Those who live upon sweetmeats have a distaste for wholesome food ; and the charms of literature and science are regarded with loathing by those, whose minds are dissipated, and whose moral tastes are depraved. When the intellect is not weakened and the character vitiated by self-indulgence and indolence, there are no pleasures equal to those which the successful pursuit of knowledge is sure to bring with it. Every step discloses a fresh landscape, every ascent unfolds a new discovery, and every divergence to the right or left brings with it an enlarged consciousness of power, which fills the soul with reasonable elation. Those who have made the trial, especially those who have made unassisted experiments in the attainment of knowledge, will bear witness to the truth of what I say ; to those who have not made trial of the fair fruits of intellectual exertions, I have only to recommend an early and an earnest commencement of a course of self-discipline in these things, with the confident promise that it will soon lead to self-emancipation.

As man is by his nature a social being, the business of self-improvement in knowledge is best carried out by co-partnership ; and thus self-improvement and mutual improvement go hand in hand, or rather converge into one employment. If you cannot form classes under the presidency of a teacher, at least form coteries or little gatherings for the interchange of ideas on subjects of common interest. Let such meetings, consisting at most of a dozen members, be held once or twice a month, to read in common some portion of an author ; and let each member in turn communicate his ideas in writing, as the thesis for a



friendly discussion. My own experience at College enables me to assure you that the most educated men can derive information and encouragement from this course, and if so, what must be its effect on those who have to make up for an early deficiency in their training? Barthold Niebuhr, who was, take him altogether, the greatest literary man of the present century, belonged to a society of this kind at Berlin, and he has left us a solemn record of the influence which it had upon his labours. "There is," he says, "an inspiration which proceeds from the presence and converse of beloved friends; an immediate acting on our minds, whereby the Muses are revealed to our view, awaking joy and strength in us, and purging our sight: to this my whole life long I have owed whatever was best in me."

Another step which you may take with a view to your self-improvement consists in the gradual formation of a class library. I mean of a collection of books, maps, drawings, and if necessary of models, immediately connected with the objects of your class studies. This will be infinitely more useful and beneficial than if you were to arrange on your shelves, in twice the number of volumes, the miscellaneous contributions of friends, the stray refuse of other libraries. There is indeed no book, or scarcely any book, from which you might not get some good: if you were to read through the contents of those trays which stand at the doors of second-hand book shops in London, all quoted at some uniform price, you would get more good than if you read nothing at all; and whatever donations you may receive, it will be with you while to accept and use them. But the object of your own contributions should be to buy special books for special work, books bearing on



your own efforts to acquire knowledge; and by the help of judicious friends, especially by the counsel of those gentlemen who may be disposed to lecture for you, the selection may be made with a tolerable degree of safety.

This last remark leads me to the other feature in your prospects of success—the help which you may hope to receive from the educated men which ~~will~~ <sup>o</sup> appear among your patrons. To such persons you must look, and I would urge you to look to no others, for direct instructions in the Lecture Room, and for counsel when you require their advice. With regard to Lectures, I have often expressed my opinion. Nothing can be less valuable than a got-up lecture, when the lecturer, to use a term of the cricket-field, is bowling beyond his strength. The only lectures good for anything in an educational point of view, are those which fall from the lips of men where knowledge is thoroughly digested, matured, and methodized, and who pour forth the unconstrained utterances of their superior enlightenment. From such men you may expect clear notions, apt illustrations, fullness of matter, and hints suggestive and creative of the studies, which I would have you pursue in classes by yourselves, and without which, the Lecturer will lecture in vain. With regard to the subjects of the Lectures delivered to you, as long as you confine yourselves to men of eminence or to those who hold a recognized position among yourselves, the selection and the mode of treatment may safely be left to the gentlemen who are willing to minister to your information. Under no circumstances should you listen to proposals for the establishment of a censorship, which would pollard all thoughts and opinions according to the pre-conceptions of individuals. In

a free country, public opinion is the only tribunal to which a speaker or writer should be required to appeal, and to say nothing of his own conscience, which must be presumed to be active and influential, until the contrary can be shewn by the evidences of his conduct, an honest and respectable man is always sufficiently guided by a regard for the good opinion of his neighbours. As far then as concerns the subjects treated here by Lecturers, you have only to select your men, and you may safely leave all the rest to them and the public. But perhaps I should hardly complete the duty which I have undertaken, if I did not express my opinion briefly in regard to the description of lectures, which I should think most likely to be advantageous to you.

In the first class then I would place those sciences which are generally illustrated by museums, especially geology, chemistry, botany, and zoology. To these descriptive astronomy will of course be added. Microscopic exhibitions and chemical manipulations are not only instructive, but eminently entertaining, and they have the great advantage of exciting curiosity, and stimulating a desire to acquire knowledge; and as wonder is the mother of science, I should estimate very highly every provocative of ignorant admiration. As merely natural science, especially as treated by mere naturalists, is apt to fall into materialism, I should be glad if physiological lectures could be occasionally combined or varied with discourses on the moral nature of man, and on the reality of his spiritual instincts; and this would enable you to gain glimpses occasionally of the greatest of modern sciences—ethnography or the philosophical demonstration of the all important fact that man is essentially one and

accidentally different. A practical deduction from this science leads to what may be considered as partly a branch of public economy. I mean the question of emigration. The belief in the common origin of mankind presumes an admission of the fact that man is by his nature, or rather by the condition of his existence, an emigrant and sporadic being. Originating in a particular locality, he could not have peopled those portions of the world which he occupies, if he had not been willing from time to time, to go forth from the land of his parentage, to clear the forest, to drain the swamp, and to colonize the wild haunts of the untameable foes of man. What has been going on from the first beginning of the world is going on still, and this island, more than all other regions, is a manufactory of nations yet unborn. When therefore you feel a want of elbow-room, and groan for wages and employment, you should bear in mind that there are colonies where the skilled workman will ever meet with a hearty welcome, where his narrow means will be turned to opulence, and where his constant complaints will be converted into cheerfulness and contentment. With regard to political economy in general, I think it would be for the interest of the working classes, if this were to take a place among the subjects formally brought before them in lectures. Every man ought to know something about the relations between rent, produce, and the profits of the farmer; between the increase of price and the diminution of supply; between the rate of wages and the price of provisions; between the cost of production and the profits of the retailer. Some knowledge on these subjects would prevent the fruitless disputes which are every day arising, and enable the journeyman, the shopkeeper, and the

manufacturer to understand the common interests which bind them to each other. Nor is it right that you should always be in the dark on the subject of taxation. You ought at least to know how a direct or indirect tax is calculated to affect you individually; how far an import or an excise duty alters your special position as a producer or consumer: and you ought to be able to appreciate the axiom that the rate of profit is never affected by taxation. Above all, you should be placed in the way of understanding the absorbing centralization and monopoly which have resulted from the formation of railroads, and that you may, instead of idly complaining that your position has been affected by this revolution, apply yourselves to the discovery of your best practical course under this change of circumstances. To say nothing of the absorption into one vortex of a hundred little scattered trades, of the drainage of a morass of industry into one great canal leading into the ocean of commerce, the railway affects the social and commercial freedom of every man in the community. Neither for the personal traveller, nor for the transport of goods is there now any free choice or alternative: as a general rule, we become slaves to the necessity of taking the cheapest and most expeditious one. And this feeling has led men to the admission, which they would not otherwise have made; that when we have once discovered the best way of doing anything, we necessarily sacrifice liberty to equality, and freedom of action to increased convenience.

The Great Exhibition in London, was a celebration of the triumph of the material interests of man over his moral independence. The world is becoming a great manufactory in which each individual is employed mechanically according to his

abilities ; and the division of labour seems likely to end by reducing each man to the rank of a tool or the integral part of a machine. Consequently the great moral question of the day is to examine the relation between our material conveniences and our freedom. And education alone, by shewing us the road on which we are travelling, can save us from falling into the pit from which there is no return. The non-independence of the mind of the middle classes, to which I adverted in an earlier part of this address, is attributable mainly to their subjection to the claims of their immediate interests. Men are not free to speak or even to think, if they are oscillating between the thralldom of class-prejudices and commercial gains.

The lessons which you may derive from political economy will be incomplete if you do not combine that knowledge with the theory of history, especially the history of your own country. Learn this lesson from the past, that England could not have become what she is, had not her citizens enjoyed the greatest of human endowments, that of a self-conscious and independent mind. There are many crises in our national history, especially those which connect themselves with our political and religious revolutions, when if our ancestors had been willing to sell the claims of their duty for the comfort and interests of the present, we should have failed to reach that proud station at which we now stand. And you must by the light of their history guide your own steps, if you would be true to your mission as genuine Englishman—if you would be, what the Englishman is, by his essential character, independent, industrious, self-denying, self-conscious, resolute, loyal, and conservative. Let me say that I use this last word, in its proper and ethical sense—not in its

political acceptance, least of all as a term of party politics. No man is truly conservative in Church or State who does not adapt the machine to the atmosphere in which it moves; and the rashest and most revolutionary innovation is not more destructive than the folly of maintaining as an essential part of the edifice that which is felt to be false and untenable. It is the business of all true education, to make man conservative in the proper sense of the term, to enable him habitually to combine a due respect for the past with a sense of the ever changing exigencies of the present, to unite a becoming reverence for transmitted opinions with that freedom of investigation by which no truth can be a loser.

Above all, as you are associated for the pursuit of a common object, as you are, by the nature of the case, a brotherhood of men, let me urge you to keep up the feeling of benevolent and considerate regard for one another, and for all with whom you may be brought in contact. Then whatever differences of opinions may arise among you or between you and others, still you will never forget that it is the great business of your lives to become and continue to be good citizens, good neighbours, good men, and, to sum up all in one word—good Christians.

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